Chapter 3. Beauty

The intention of my art is to make objects that depict extinct Tasmanian plants in a manner that might generate awareness of what we have lost and to elicit reflection and concern about the future of the environment. I have attempted to achieve this response by creating art that viewers might consider beautiful. These beautiful renditions of extinct plants are designed to induce thoughtful consideration which may lead to an increase in the esteem in which the memory of the plants are held and encourage concern for the future of other living entities.

My aim is subversive and sinister. I have not sought to present beautiful work that brings pleasure, as is commonly the case; instead, my intention has been to generate feelings of anguish and disquiet. I present the extinct plants in a beautiful form but I remind viewers that these once living entities are now lost forever. The application of beauty is subversive because it functions as a veil that may elicit the connections on one hand, but on the other hand, reveals the sinister reality that these connections have been lost.

In Part One of this chapter, I present theories that explain how beauty has been defined in the past. I also examine the position of beauty in the context of contemporary visual arts. I conclude this section of the chapter by linking these theories with my own art work. In Part Two of this chapter, I describe how people are affected when they are in the presence of beauty as this will provide insights about how beautiful art works might affect viewers. In Part Three of the chapter, I discuss theories that elucidate and support my premise regarding the capacity of beauty to engender concern and compassion .

Part 1. Defining Beauty

Beauty has been a focus of philosophical enquiry for at least two and a half thousand years, and the way beauty has been described has been subject to the conceptions of reality held at different times. Since beauty 'is not eternal and

constant but culturally dependent',[1] I will examine views from antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Enlightenment, the twentieth century and the new millennium. These ideas will focus on those who have contributed to the development of contemporary art and those who have a particular relevance to my visual art.

Definitions of beauty have not necessarily improved through chronological revision, as is the case in the fields of science or mathematics. Instead, ancient and subsequent views of beauty tend to illuminate different aspects of the subject. Indeed, beauty has a beguiling capacity to be described in ways that are not true in all cases. For example, one can argue that beauty can be found in the ugly, but not all ugly things are beautiful.

Classical Theories: Number and the Cosmos

For classical Greek philosophers, the divine realm was privileged over human thought.[2] In this metaphysical world-view the divine (or the ideal) realm was seen to be the source of wisdom, truth and beauty.[3] The structure of the soul was not regarded as being independent from the divine realm but rather as being aligned with it, an idea that differs markedly from our current understanding.[4] This classical conception of reality led Pythagoras, a mathematician of the sixth century BC, to apply a discovery he made in the field of music to a theory which he felt could explain the beauty of the world and human responses to beauty.[5] Pythagoras discovered that a note plucked from one string would harmonise with a note plucked from another string that was exactly half the length of the original string.[6] Pythagoras concluded that behind the apparent confusion of the observable world lies a mathematical order, and that the concept of beauty is a 'matter of mathematical proportion'.[7] Pythagoras believed that the 'structure of the soul is essentially the same as the

[1] Goran Sorbom, "The Classical Concept of Mimesis", in *A Companion to Art Theory*, ed. Paul Smith & Carolyn Wilde, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 19.
[2] Peyton Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1978), 28.
[3] Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* 28.
[4] John Armstrong, *The Secret Power of Beauty*, (London: Allen Lane, 2004), 28.
[5] Armstrong, *The Secret Power of Beauty*, 26
[6] Armstrong, *The Secret Power of Beauty*, 26.
[7] Armstrong, *The Secret Power of Beauty*, 28.

structure of the universe'.[8] So, it was no surprise to him that when people are happy they are said to be in harmony with the world and, by contrast, when people are feeling discordant with the world, there is a problem.[9]

The idea that the essence of beauty is to be found in the mathematical structure and order was also held by the nineteenth century scholar Eric Newton, who maintained that the basis of beauty in the observable world is 'the underlying mathematical behaviour of phenomena apprehended intuitively'.[10]

Beauty, Truth and Reason

In the fifth century BC the Greek philosopher Socrates believed that only philosophers 'can know true realities, perfect truth and beauty and goodness'[11] and that it was their role to instruct and legislate 'on the kind of aesthetic environment which will nurture good men'.[12] Socrates believed that artists were mere imitators of things, and that they were incapable of knowing their own best interests.[13] Beauty, along with goodness and truth, were moral issues considered necessary in the promotion of public welfare.

Plato, a student of Socrates, believed that the most sublime experience a person can have is 'direct confrontation with the Idea of the Good, the perfect Beauty, Symmetry, and Truth'.[14] Plato held that beauty was one of the ideal forms in the metaphysical realm which was apprehended by the mind and not the senses. Furthermore, Plato regarded the human realm of the senses to be inferior to reason in accessing truth. He believed that as the beauty of art and music appealed to the senses, they were seen 'as an obstacle to insight into the ideal realm.'[15] Others consider that sensual experience to be as much a mental activity as that of thought and reflection.[16] Despite this counter argument a

[8] Armstrong, *The Secret Power of Beauty*, 28.
[9] Armstrong, *The Secret Power of Beauty*, 28.
[10] Eric Newton, as quoted in James Kirwan, *Beauty*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 55.
[11] Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* 4.
[12] Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* 4.
[13] Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* 4.
[14] Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* 28.
[15] David Cooper, "Ineffability", in *A Companion to Aesthetics,* ed. David Cooper (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 221.
[16] Gordon Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2000), 54.

remnant of Plato's position, in which he posits that attention to the senses which beauty elicits is an obstacle to truth, is still evident.

In the fourth century BC Aristotle, who was a student of Plato, wrote that the beauty of a living thing, or a work of art, displays a unity in variety and an integration of parts which would be spoiled if anything was added or subtracted. [17] Aristotle disagreed with Plato's condemnation of the sensual , holding that beauty in human constructions, including art, comes from the mind.[18] Therefore people are capable of creating beauty.

In the third century BC Plotinus concurred with the idea that beauty in artefacts comes from the mind and illustrated the point with the following example. An artist can take a block of stone and can carve it to make an object that is more beautiful than the original block of stone.[19] Thus Plotinus 'considered art to be a way of reproducing or capturing the beauty and truth of the invisible world in visible form'.[20] He held that beauty 'is a fragment of the divine fallen into matter' [21] and that 'beauty is a longing for the divine'.[22]

The next major revision to the way in which beauty was envisaged in Western thought occurred during the medieval period when the dominant religion in Europe was Christianity.[23] At that time, the sun of human beauty was said to be obscured by the moon of divine beauty.[24] Theologians believed that God was the first and ultimate artist[25] and that there were 'two forms of beauty, one human, superficial, and relative, and one divine , real, and objective, which is its cause'.[26] Clement of Alexandria described 'God as the true beauty' while Ficino wrote that 'Beauty is the attraction of the soul back to its origin in God, it is God as attraction'.[27]

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[17] Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* 57.
[18] Benedetto Croce, *Aesthetic*, (Boston: Nonpareil Books, 1978), 165.
[19] Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* 77.
[20] Sorbom, "The Classical Concept of Mimesis", 30.
[21] Armstrong, *The Secret Power of Beauty,* 29.
[22] Armstrong, *The Secret Power of Beauty,* 29.
[23] Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* 8.
[24] Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* 8.
[25] Sorbom, "The Classical Concept of Mimesis", 30.
[26] Kirwan, *Beauty*, 24.
[27] Kirwan, *Beauty*, 31.

Light was associated with beauty during the medieval period, 'light itself being held to be the most beautiful of things'.[28] Aquinas identifies 'three conditions of beauty- integrity, harmony, and clarity'[29] and he defined beauty as a 'certain proportion and lustre that meant not only bright colours...but also the showing forth of the essence of a thing',[30] an idea that is discussed in relation to my work later in this chapter.

The Development of Modern Understandings of Beauty

The eighteenth century European Enlightenment is generally regarded as the beginning of the modern epoch because it heralded a new way of thinking. For many Enlightenment philosophers the structure of human psychology became the focus of theorising in the arts.[31] When Alexander Baumgarten published his book *Aesthetica* in 1750, the study of beauty became known as 'aesthetics'.[32] This term was used to describe the field of inquiry in the 'science of sensuous knowledge' or the 'meaning and value of our experiences of beauty and art'.[33]

This interest in the 'science' of perception enabled philosophers to consider that beauty 'originates from the mind itself'[34] and not from a divine source, or from God, as it had been conceived in the past. Two ideologies emerged, with one school maintaining that beauty was subjective, being in the mind of the beholder, while others, like William Hogarth, held that beauty was due to characteristics inherent in objects.

Subject/Object

Hogarth, a proponent of the objective view of beauty, claimed that he had discovered 'the serpentine line of beauty'.[35] According to Hogarth, this

[28] Kirwan, *Beauty*, 57.
[29] Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* 9.
[30] Kirwan, *Beauty*, 57.
[31] John Haldane, "Medieval and Renaissance Aesthetics", in *A Companion to Aesthetics,* ed. David Cooper (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 279.
[32] Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* 5.
[33] Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* 5.
[34] Haldane, "Medieval and Renaissance Aesthetics", 280.
[35] Armstrong, *The Secret Power of Beauty,* 6.

line of beauty was frequently found in the silhouettes of the female body. [36] He argued that he 'could now explain how certain principles -"fitness, variety, uniformity, simplicity, and quantity" cooperate in producing beauty'.[37] Nevertheless, a logical objection to the idea of the 'serpentine line of beauty' was mounted by a gentleman who claimed his large stomach conformed to this line, however he, along with others, believed that his stomach was ugly.[38] This example demonstrates the central problem with identifying objective characteristics inherent in beautiful objects, as these characteristics are not necessarily beautiful in all cases. It is therefore tempting to dismiss the objective view of beauty, however John Armstrong, a contemporary philosopher, suggests that despite their lack of reliability, lists of objective characteristics do 'provide real insights into the beauty of some things', and as they are not entirely in error, they may be helpful in creating a picture of beauty.[39]

During the eighteenth century, deliberations about beauty focused on the apprehension of beauty and on considerations of a person's sense of taste.[40] The change from the objective view to that of subjectivity is illustrated by the theories of Edmund Burke and George Santayana. The objectivist Burke wrote that beauty is a quality in objects that acts mechanically upon the 'human mind by the intervention of the senses',[41] while Santayana demonstrated a commitment to subjectivity when he claimed that 'The beauty we attribute to objects is not in the objects, it is in us'.[42] Beauty, he argued 'is a psychological phenomenon, by which we project qualities of sensation and emotion into objects'.[43]

A modern perspective on the objective/subjective view of beauty is presented by Armstrong, who phrases this in terms of a physical/spiritual binary. He

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[36] Sheldon Cheney, *A World History of Art*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1944), 768.
[37] William Hogarth as quoted in Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* 90.
[38] Armstrong, *The Secret Power of Beauty,* 15.
[39] Armstrong, *The Secret Power of Beauty,* 35.
[40] Peg Zeglin Brand, "Symposium: Beauty Matters," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57:1 (Winter 1999): 3.
[41] Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* 105.
[42] Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* 327.
[43] Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* 327.

argues that human life is experienced in two guises, both physical and spir itual and, in a similar fashion, beauty is both physical (the qualities inherent in beautiful objects) and spiritual (the intuition at play when we experience beauty).[44] For Armstrong the experience of beauty consists in finding 'spiritual value (truth, happiness, moral ideals) at home in a material setting (rhythm, line, shape, structure) and in a way that, while we contemplate the object, the two seem inseparable '.[45] The physical/spiritual binary is also a characteristic of the work of other visual artists who deal with both physical or virtual materials and the manipulation of them to evoke meaning, which is discussed in Chapter Four.

Kant, Disinterest and Modern Art

Kant made observations regarding aesthetic judgments that were highly influential in the development of modern art. Kant made a distinction between three types of pleasure; the pleasure we take in the agreeable (or gratification), the pleasure we take in the good (or approval) and the pleasure we take in the beautiful (or free liking).[46] Kant's view regarding the pleasure we find in the beautiful was persuasive in the history of aesthetics.[47]

Kant claimed that the plea sure we find in the beautiful 'arises not from any concept of the understanding but from the free play of the imagination'.[48] Therefore, when we view an object of beauty, we gain pleasure merely from contemplating it; we are 'not concerned with its existence or with its usefulness or uselessness: the satisfaction we have in the object is completely disinterested'.[49] An example of this disinterested pleasure might emerge if we were to look out of a window and become struck by the beauty of a sunset, even though we did not have an expectation of being affected in this way , since the sunset fulfils no predetermined desire. Indeed, Kant held that the pleasure in beauty must be devoid of desire[50] and that 'any value we attach to

[44] Armstrong, *The Secret Power of Beauty*, 163.
[45] Armstrong, *The Secret Power of Beauty*, 163.
[46] David Whewell, "Kant, Immanuel", in *A Companion to Aesthetics,* ed. David Cooper (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 251.
[47] Whewell, "Kant, Immanuel", 254.
[48] Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts*, 15.
[49] Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* 130.
[50] Brand, "Symposium: Beauty Matters", 3.

it belongs to it alone and is not dependent on considerations of morality, utility, personal advantage, or sensory gratification'.[51] Subsequently this idea became highly influential in the development of abstract art during the twentieth century and I will explore this before returning to additional aspects of Kant's aesthetic theory.

Kant's claim regarding the pleasure we find in the beautiful was taken up in the twentieth century by the champions of abstract art, who privileged formal elements over content.[52] This way of thinking was articulated by Bell in his development of the concept of 'significant form'.[53] Bell asserted that 'in authentic art, the painted forms are themselves the objects of our (aesthetic) emotion, not the means of suggesting emotion and conveying ideas'.[54] Bell went on to explain that 'the proper goal of art is not the perfecting of mimetic activity…For imitation we now have the camera. …if a representative form has value, it is as form, not as representation'.[55] Later in the twentieth century critics, such as Clement Greenberg and Michael Field, held that 'the task for authentic art is to explore the conditions of its own medium in order not to represent the world, but to give expression to its own nature'.[56] These ideas echo Kant's view that aesthetic pleasure 'arises not from any concept' and that 'any value we attach to it belongs to it alone and is not dependent on considerations of morality, unity, personal advantage, or sensory gratification'.[57]

Kant also emphasises the distinction between first and second-order judgements,[58] where first-order judgements describe the pleasure we find in the beautiful as disinterested (as noted above). These kinds of judgements involve the senses and arise out of a feeling of approval, such as a preference

[51] Whewell, "Kant, Immanuel", 251.
[52] Ronald Hepburn, "Bell, (Arthur) Clive (Heward) (1881-1964)", in *A Companion to Aesthetics,* ed. David Cooper (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 51.
[53] Hepburn, "Bell, (Arthur) Clive (Heward) (1881-1964)", 51.
[54] Hepburn, "Bell, (Arthur) Clive (Heward) (1881-1964)", 51.
[55] Hepburn, "Bell, (Arthur) Clive (Heward) (1881-1964)", 51.
[56] Steven Connor, "Modernism and Postmodernism", in *A Companion to Aesthetics,* ed. David Cooper (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 288.
[57] Whewell, "Kant, Immanuel", 251.
[58] Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts*, 14.

for white wine over red wine.[59] This kind of decision is qualitatively different from the judgements we make when we call something beautiful, and it is different because 'in this case of the beautiful the subject judges "not merely for himself but for all men" and then speaks of beauty as if it were a property of all things'.[60] Kant held that when one says an item is beautiful, they are making a second-order judgement which involves logic which is mediated by our moral nature.[61] These second-order judgements are those located half way between the 'logically necessary' such as a mathematical theorem, and the purely 'subjective', such as a preference for a certain colour.[62] The judgement is not merely subjective because when one says, 'a thing is beautiful' one believes that others will understand what is meant, even if they do not agree,[63] and, therefore, such a claim for beauty is made with the demand for universal assent.[64]

In an effort to explain the curious double nature of judgements of taste that arise from subjective feelings that also demand universal assent, Kant postulates the notion of a *sensus communis* or 'common sensitive nature' among people.[65] He maintained that 'the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good'[66] writing that 'we cannot understand aesthetic experience except by relating it to our moral natures as followers of universal principles'.[67] It was only through linking the moral with the aesthetic that he could 'justify the demand for universal agreement that aesthetic judgements bring with them…'.[68] The idea that judgements of beauty are related to moral judgements will be discussed further in Part Three of this chapter.

[59] Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts*, 12.
[60] Kant as quoted in Whewell, "Kant, Immanuel", 252.
[61] John White, "Morality and Art", in *A Companion to Aesthetics,* ed. David Cooper (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 293.
[62] Kant as quoted in Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts*, 12.
[63] Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* 133.
[64] Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts*, 15.
[65] Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts*, 13.
[66] White, "Morality and Art", 293.
[67] White, "Morality and Art", 293.
[68] White, "Morality and Art", 293.

The Beautiful and the Sublime

Another aspect of Kant's theory of aesthetic judgements that has been influential in the development of modern art is his analysis of the sublime and the beautiful.[69] In this divided aesthetic realm the sublime was nearly always the dominant member of the pair.[70] As the diminutive member, beauty was 'almost always also the dismissible member'.[71] This division of the aesthetic realm signalled the beginning of the demise of beauty in visual arts, and this was to continue until late in the twentieth century. In the next section I discuss factors which coalesced to affect the demise of beauty in the visual arts of the twentieth century. This has a bearing on my art as it was this background which I was required to access, question and unlimitedly reject in generating this body of visual work.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century Joseph Addison was the first to suggest a distinction between the beautiful and the sublime.[72] His concept of the sublime, notably that of agreeable horror, caught on rapidly.[73] Edmund Burke argued that the sublime is in some way 'terrible' and hence capable of instilling fear,[74] while the pleasure of beauty 'is to be found in the social passions predominately that of sex, but also involving friendship and sympathy with others'.[75] In his later commentary on these ideas, Kant listed the attributes of the sublime and the beautiful as follows:

> The sublime is male, the beautiful is female… The sublime resides in mountains, Milton's Hell, and tall oaks in a sacred grove; the beautiful resides in flowers and Elysian meadows. The sublime is night, the beautiful is day. The sublime moves… beauty charms… The sublime is great; the beautiful "can also be small"… The sublime is principled, noble, righteous; the beautiful is compassionate and good hearted.[76]

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[69] Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 83.
[70] Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just,* 82.
[71] Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just,* 84.
[72] Mary Mothersill, "Sublime", in *A Companion to Aesthetics,* ed. David Cooper (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 408.
[73] Mothersill, "Sublime", 408.
[74] Patrick Gardiner, "Burke, Edmund (1727-97)", in *A Companion to Aesthetics,* ed. David Cooper (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 56
[75] Gardiner, "Burke, Edmund (1727-97)", 57.
[76] Scarry, *On Beauty,* 84.

There is evidence here of an oppositional gender binary in this thinking with a clear hierarchy of dominance between the superior and sublime masculinity and inferior beauty as feminine. In this analysis the might of the total landscape 'is sublime in those phenomena whose intuition brings with it the idea of infinity'.[77] Kant maintained that the 'beautiful in nature is concerned with the form of the object, which consists in having definite boundaries' while the sublime 'is to be found in a formless object' such as a mountain range or raging storm, the sky having no boundaries'.[78]

The term 'sublime' was entrenched by the latter part of the eighteenth century with people of taste having access to a range of examples to which they might apply the term sublime, such as pyramids and raging seas.[79] In the twentieth century the concept of the sublime remained a goal for artists such as Mark Rothko who believed that painting was 'essentially a vehicle of spiritual concerns and values, an expression of faith'.[80] For Rothko, paintings 'must be like miracles'[81] capable of overwhelming 'the senses with works of sublime directness'.[82] Thus, while the sublime flourished during modernism, beauty languished.

The Continued Demise of Beauty

In addition to Kant's privileging of the sublime over beauty, there were other influences that led to the demise of beauty in the visual arts during the twentieth century. These include the developing interest in psychology and the advent of expressionism in the twentieth century. Furthermore, the political and moral critique of beauty and the institutional view of art have helped to marginalise and diminish its importance in the visual arts in the twentieth century. Consequently, this accumulation of factors has brought about what Wendy Steiner called the 'exile' of beauty.[83] An examination of these factors

[77] Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* 147.
[78] Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* 143.
[79] Mothersill, "Sublime", 407.
[80] Herbert Read, *A Concise History of Modern Painting,* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), 290.
[81] Read, *A Concise History of Modern Painting*, 290.
[82] Read, *A Concise History of Modern Painting,* 290.
[83] Wendy Steiner, *Venus in Exile,* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), xv.

helps to explain my sense of trepidation in creating work that I hope will elicit a beautiful response.

The study of the psychology of art (in an attempt to identify the qualities of objects that elicit a beautiful response) became the focus of aesthetics during the nineteenth century and has extended on into the twenty-first century.[84] The attempt to reach a rational explanation for aspects of the human response to art has produced research that has revealed, for example, that there are colour preferences in sections of a given population. More controversially, there are other investigators who have developed theories regarding the type of art enjoyed by introverted or extroverted people.[85] However, these studies were challenged by theorists such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, who early in the twentieth century, questioned the relevance of psychology to art. He argued that 'psychological experiments designed to determine which musical or pictorial arrangements produce the more pleasing effect on a particular person or set of people are irrelevant to aesthetics'.[86] For Wittgenstein 'aesthetic appreciation is concerned, not with liking or disliking a work of art, but with understanding it and experiencing its features, right or wrong, better or worse, close or distant from an ideal'.[87] Wittgenstein recognised that art is valued by people because it can contribute to human insight and understanding.[88]

The continued demise of beauty in the twentieth century is evident in progression of views from Hegel to Veron and those of Tolstoy. In the 1920s, Hegel argued that 'aesthetics is the science of the beautiful in fine art; the task of aestheticians is to explain how beauty manifests in works of art …or how a sensuous form is made to express spiritual content'.[89] By contrast, Veron believed that art was a broad enough concept to encompass all works of beauty, but beauty alone was an insufficient concept to encompass all works of art. [90] Meanwhile, Fry described the demise of beauty when he wrote that 'in

[84] Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* 289.
[85] H. J. Eysenck, "The General Factor in Aesthetic Judgement", 1940 in Don Brothwell, *Beyond Aesthetics,* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), 162.
[86] David Cooper, *A Companion to Aesthetics,* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 446.
[87] Cooper, *A Companion to Aesthetics,* 446.
[88] Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts*, 62.
[89] Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* 15.
[90] Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* 15.

his youth all aesthetics had "revolved with wearisome persistence" around a search for the criteria of beauty'.[91] Tolstoy was even more adamant than Veron in his rejection of the alliance between beauty and art , demanding that 'art should not be concerned with the creation of beaut y but rather with the expression and communication of emotion'.[92] This Tolstoyen idea was central to the 'radical new sense of freedom' that was evident amongst the proponents of abstract expressionism.[93] For abstract expressionists, the land artists, the pop artists and the conceptual artists, came demands to expand the field of art.[94] This resulted from a strong sense of discontentment with its traditional role.[95] In this effort to expand the field of art beyond this role, beauty was abandoned.

The distancing of beauty from aesthetics in the later part of the twentieth century is apparent in Anthony Quinton's definition of aesthetics which appeared in the 1970s*:* 'It aims to identify the characteristic value (which few would now call beauty) of aesthetically satisfying objects'.[96] Steiner summarised the position of beauty in the late twentieth century : 'In modernism the perennial rewards of aesthetic experience - pleasure, insight, empathy - were largely withheld, and its generous aim beauty, was abandoned'.[97] Beauty, it seemed, was out of favour.

A further relegation in the second half of the twentieth century occurred because of the growth of the institutional view of art (which concerned itself with meaning), and the view that beauty was divergent from this purpose, associated with commercial success. B eauty in modern art was regarded with suspicion because of its capacity to sell, which was a problem, according to David Hickey, in that 'if it sells itself, it is an idolatrous commodity: if it sells

[91] Fry as quoted in Kirwan, *Beauty*, 96.
[92] Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* 384.
[93] Herbert Read, *A Concise History of Modern Painting*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), 260.
[94] Read, *A Concise History of Modern Painting,* 323.
[95] Read, *A Concise History of Modern Painting,* 323.
[96] Anthony Quinton, "Aesthetics" in *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought,* eds. Alan Bullock, Oliver Stallybrass & Stephen Trombley, (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 13.
[97] Steiner, *Venus in Exile,* xv.

anything else it is a seductive advertisement.'[98] Hickey lamented the continued 'persistence of dated modernism with its conventions concerning the canonical status of "flatness" and the inconsequence of "beauty"'.[99] He maintained that if one were to mention beauty in a conversation, it did not incite a conversation about the iconography of desire – or pleasure – or politics, instead it 'ignited a conversation about the market' and the corruption of the market.[100]

Hickey claimed that the 'art professionals', those 'benevolent wardens' of the public institutions, contended that they 'must look carefully and genuinely care about what artists "really" mean - and therefore they must mistrust, almost of necessity, distrust appearances - distrust the very idea of appearances'.[101] According to the austere views of the art professionals, beauty was considered to be:

> the snake in the garden because it steals the institution's power, seduces the congregation, and, in every case elicits the dismay of artists who have committed themselves to plain honesty and the efficacy of the institution.[102]

Hickey's comments instigated a revaluation of beauty in the visual arts from the mid 1990s onwards, and almost 'single-handedly revived the topic to major proportions'.[103]

The Return of Beauty

The return of beauty has encouraged new questions about what it has come to mean in the contemporary arts. Llosa writes that 'Contemporary aesthetics has established the beauty of ugliness',[104] and that beauty has coopted in 'reclaiming for art everything in human experience that artistic representation had previously rejected'.[105] Steiner argues that, 'Modern artworks may often

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[98] David Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty,* (Los Angeles: Art Issues, 1993), 16.
[99] Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon,* 40.
[100] Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon,* 13.
[101] Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon,* 16.
[102] Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon,* 16.
[103] Brand, "Symposium: Beauty Matters", 1.
[104] Mario Vargas Llosa. "Botero: a Sumptuous Abundance", quoted in Wendy Steiner, *Venus in Exile*, (New York: The Free Press, 2001), xv.
[105] Llosa, "Botero: a Sumptuous Abundance", quoted in Steiner, *Venus in Exile*, xv.

have been profoundly beautiful, but theirs was a tough beauty, hedged with deprivation, denial, revolt'.[106] Brand confirms this assessment, noting that 'at present issues of gender, culture, environment, love, subversion and somewhat surprisingly ugliness' have all made their way into contemporary understanding of beauty.[107] This darker side of beauty has raised questions, such as these implied by Brand:

> This new dark side of beauty is unexpected. It goads philosophers into delving into the moral, social, and political implications of a culture that finds the ugly beautiful. When anorexic girls, blood and vomit, junkies, dead sharks and sado-masochistic sex come to be revered as beautiful, we can remain disinterested or we can honestly confront the perversity of how beauty has come to matter in distinctly non-traditional ways.[108]

There is a connection between these distinctly non-traditional ways of viewing beauty and my art, as I aim to present beautiful representations of extinct plants to reveal the darker side of loss. As well as this connection between non-traditional ways of viewing beauty, my practical work has also been informed by the philosophical perspectives of beauty outlined earlier in this chapter.

Pythagoras's idea that a mathematical order can create harmony and therefore beauty is apparent in the design of my wreaths. I have used symmetry, repetition and rhythm in the design of the embroidered wreaths and in the patterns applied to the funeral urns. However, I have found that these elements are not a guarantee of a beautiful form, and that frequently when generating the designs for the wreaths, the most effective designs are those that depart from a precise mathematical arrangement.

[106] Steiner, *Venus in Exile,* xv.
[107] Brand, "Symposium: Beauty Matters," 7.
[108] Brand, "Symposium: Beauty Matters," 7.

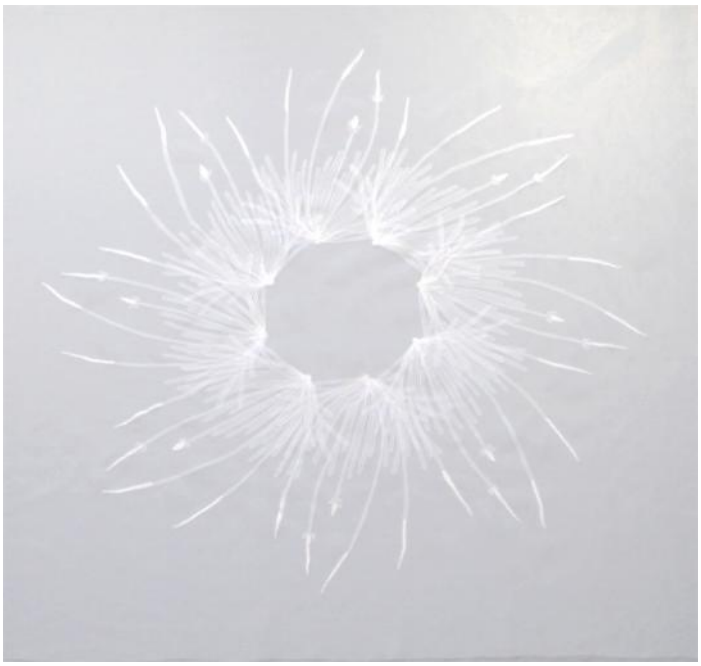

Figure 3-1. Robyn Glade-Wright, *Wreath for Myosurus minimus*, 2005. Hand stitched polyester. 110cm x 110cm.

While an underlying mathematical structure is satisfying, diversity and a divergence from precise mathematical order are attributes that also contribute to the intrigue of a design. In the wreath shown in Figure 3-1, I have used repetition and symmetry, and in addition I have tilted the plants to create a more dynamic impression.

The medieval notion that beauty reveals the essence of an object has a strong relationship with my visual work. I was conscious of this idea while I was embroidering the wreaths, and also aware of the shift that occurred between the representations of the plants and my interpretation in the embroidery. My aim was to reveal the essence of the plant rather than attempt to reproduce its physical characteristics in an accurate scale and precise detail. This is similar to Aquinas's idea that beauty could show the essence of a thing. A further Aquinian connection within my work is my use of shadows or the absence of light. The plants in the embroidered wreaths are not rendered in light but rather in shadows, an absence of light which alludes to the absence of life.

Figure 3-2. Robyn Glade-Wright, *Lost,* 2002,
Hand stitched polyester organza. 100cm x 50cm.

Kant's linking of the moral with the aesthetic in his analysis of aesthetic judgment has been most influential in my consideration of my art. I anticipate that viewers of my art will experience an aesthetic response which is understood by relating it to their moral natures as followers of universal principles.[109] The practical and aesthetic considerations of my work in realising these ideas are discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

In Part One of this chapter, beauty has been described as a concept which is culturally dependent and has varied over time. Kant's theory of aesthetic judgement and in particular his claim that we cannot understan d aesthetic experience without relating it to our moral nature has been discussed in relation to my understanding of how my art may generate contemplation amongst the viewers of the work. The factors that culminated in the demise of beauty in the visual arts in the twentieth ce ntury have been discussed as has the return of beauty at the end of the last century. The idea that an experience of beauty is a subjective response to a trigger object, idea, person or sound is the view of beauty that I hold and this view recognises the role of the object or artefact in triggering an experience of beauty. The experience of beauty will be the subject of the next section of this chapter.

[109] White, "Morality and Art", in *A Companion to Aesthetics,* 293.

Part 2. The Experience of Beauty

The experience of being struck by exquisite beauty is emotional and moving. I investigate this experience in this section, as knowledge of this has assisted me to appreciate how viewers may be moved in the presence of beauty. I detail this emotional and cognitive journey in what follows, including views from ancient and modern times. This rich web of ideas helps to explain individuals' varied reactions to beauty.

The experience of beauty is one in which our usual thinking can be suspended and supplanted by a cognitive journey. This journey, according to Kirwan, commences with a trigger object or idea that affects the senses. Beauty is a first-person experience that 'always takes place in the particular'. [110] It is not possible to gain the pleasure that beauty brings if we are merely told about beauty by another person. We have to see the art or hear the sound of an orchestra ourselves be moved by an experience of beauty.[111] Beauty is a sensation that strikes us and, as a new instance of beauty is unforeseeable, it is a surprise.[112] We cannot control when we will be moved by beauty and, if we try to invoke an experience of beauty from past experiences, the result is lifeless.[113] When experiencing beauty we are liable to 'gape and suspend all thought' inciting new deliberation.[114] Perceptively, in his efforts to explain this situation, Santayana maintains that we 'project qualities of sensation and emotion into objects that we find to be beautiful.[115] For Spinoza 'beauty is not so much a quality of the object which is perceived as an effect on him who perceives it'.[116] Therefore an experience of beauty is a form of reaction to a trigger object or idea, and it is self-engendered in a process of reflection.[117]

This process of reflection generates a sense of transport, revelation and reverence which transcends the trigger object or idea. Many people who encounter beauty acknowledge that in this encounter, they are transported to a

[110] Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just,* 18.
[111] Mothersill, "Beauty", 46.
[112] Kirwan, *Beauty*, 124.
[113] Kirwan, *Beauty*, 124.
[114] Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just,* 29.
[115] Santayana as quoted in Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* 328.
[116] Spinoza as quoted in Kirwan, *Beauty*, 16.
[117] Kirwan, *Beauty*, 89.

state in which they feel a connection with something greater than themselves. For people with an inclination toward the objectivist view, the nature of their reflection may be thought by them to be similar to that of Cicero, who claims that 'we have an innate sense of beauty which simply responds to the beauty, that is the perfection of the world'.[118] For people who believe in a God, the cause of their reaction may be attributed to 'a ray emanating from God, shining through matter and attracting the soul back to the creator'.[119] Other theorists suggest that the cause of people's reactions during an experience of beauty are due to; memory (Fechner),[120] sentiment (Hume),[121] and empathy (Lipps).[122] Guyau describes the experience of beauty as one consisting of 'a perception or an action which stimulates simultaneously the three forms of life in us – sensibility, intelligence, and will – and produces pleasure by the rapid consciousness of this general stimulation'.[123] Our beliefs determine the judgments of beauty, and these are subjective.

The experience of beauty is said to be an edifying one, filling us with a sense of something profound, and providing an inspiration that 'feels in some way revelatory'.[124] This idea is echoed in the work of Ruskin, Kirwan, and Kant. Ruskin writes of beauty as a journey that is 'accompanied by joy, the love of the object, then the perception of kindness in a superior intelligence, then thankfulness and veneration towards intelligence itself',[125] while Kirwan adds that 'Beauty thus always comes with… a sense of the abundance, the plenitude of life'.[126] Kant observes that: 'The beautiful brings with it a feeling of the furtherance of life'.[127]

Longinus, writing in classical times, believed that in beauty 'we perceive around us the end for which we were created, for we have an unquenchable

[118] Kirwan, *Beauty*, 23.
[119] Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* 328.
[120] Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* 288.
[121] Michael Smithurst, "Hume, David (1711-76)" in *A Companion to Aesthetics,* ed. David Cooper (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 197.
[122] Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* 295.
[123] Guyau as quoted in Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* 235.
[124] Kirwan, *Beauty*, 63.
[125] Ruskin as quoted in Kirwan, *Beauty*, 79.
[126] Kirwan, *Beauty*, 124.
[127] Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* 143.

love for what is greater or more divine than we are',[128] while Diotima proposed that 'the desire for the beautiful is likewise a desire for immortality'.[129] Goethe, writing in the eighteenth century, claimed that 'our greatest happiness rests in our longings and that true longing may have as its goal only what is unattainable'.[130]

The feelings generated by the reflections apparent during the stasis of beauty engender a sense of ecstasy.[131] This is a transitory state as: 'Paradise is never here and now, for one cannot be conscious of being entirely happy; the moment I become absolute, in ecstasy, the "I" disappears; such a moment is timeless, but the "I" that wanted ecstasy no longer exists'.[132] Finally, the feeling subsides, as 'beauty is associated with both transcendence and a falling short,' leaving us with a sense of yearning.[133] In this phase, the object that triggered the experience of beauty is concealed or suppressed.[134]

Summary of the Experience of Beauty

The experience of beauty presented above can be summarised as one that results from a trigger object or idea that affects the senses and invokes reflection. The ensuing sense of transport, revelation and reverence transcends the object or idea that triggered the experience. And finally, the feeling subsides and we feel a sense of yearning. Although this path is speculative, I have encountered this progression of thought when moved by beautiful items and people. These accounts of the human response to the concept of beauty have contributed to my understanding of why beauty is important to us. In relation to my art, I hope that my work initiates an experience of beauty, and that the combination of delight, regret and desire[135] may focus thoughtful consideration on the plants we have lost, and those still living. An important aspect of this investigation is that beauty is a sensation which is self-

[128] Kirwan, *Beauty*, 35.
[129] Kirwan, *Beauty*, 71.
[130] Kirwan, *Beauty*, 68.
[131] Kirwan, *Beauty*, 68
[132] Kirwan, *Beauty*, 68.
[133] Kirwan, *Beauty*, 37.
[134] Kirwan, *Beauty*, 39.
[135] Kirwan, *Beauty*, 38.

engendered in a process of reflection.[136] Dewey makes the observation that 'There is no such thing as "easy" beauty' recognising the demanding task the appreciator of a work of art has before him [sic].[137] It is reassuring that an experience of beauty can be triggered by objects, because artists are creators of objects (real or virtual) and since beauty is self-engendered, the audience are participants and co-contributors to the meaning of a work of art.

Part 3. Beauty and Justice

Elaine Scarry describes two attributes of beauty which are related to the aims of my visual work. Scarry writes of beauty as if it is both an objective quality inherent in the world and a subjective human response.

The first of these ideas is that of stewardship. Scarry suggests that in the presence of what is beautiful, we are moved towards a form of stewardship 'to protect or perpetuate a fragment of beauty already in the world'[138] or to create a new beauty, to supplement it by bringing into being a new object'.[139] This welcoming between the beautiful object and the viewer is 'a reciprocal salute to the continuation of one another's existence'.[140] I find this idea to be one of the most compelling in my search for why beauty intrigues and perplexes me. If beauty is both life-affirming and generative of creative acts, then it relates to two fundamental drivers of my existence and my art, that of nurturing and of creating.

The idea of stewardship may explain why people hope that beauty exists, even when their own 'interests are not served by it; or perhaps more accurately, people seem to intuit that their own self interest is served by distant peoples' having beauty'.[141] This is why people become 'so upset about the disappearance of kelp forests they had never heard of until the moment they were informed of the loss…'.[142] This hope that beauty exists even when one's

[136] Kirwan, *Beauty*, 89.
[137] Dewey as quoted in Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics,* 401.
[138] Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just,* 95.
[139] Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just,* 114.
[140] Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just,* 92.
[141] Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just,* 123.
[142] Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just,* 123.

own interests are not directly served may explain to some extent why people are distressed when they learn that twenty two Tasmania n plants are extinct, when it is unlikely that they would ever interact with those plants if the y were still alive.

The second idea of Scarry's is that beauty has the capacity 'to act as a lever in the direction of justice'.[143] Scarry writes that 'beautiful things give rise to the notion of distribution, to a lifesaving reciprocity, to fairness not just in the sense of loveliness of aspect but in the sense of "a symmetry of everyone's relationship to one another"'.[144] This symmetry (or fairness) of everyone's relationship to one another or lever in the direction of justice occurs as result of the radical decentring we undergo when we are affected by beauty.[145] When we experience beauty, we cease to stand in the centre of our own world and the cluster of feelings that normally promote the self dissipate.[146] The space formerly used for self-protection is now available 'to be in the service of something else' and 'a more capacious act is possible'.[147]

Scarry claims that both beauty and justice are available to the senses but justice cannot be seen as easily as beauty. The beauty of the sky for instance is widely available to all people at most times. Justice on the other hand is not as readily available. If we walk through a city we may see people in cars obeying traffic rules but justice is seldom available 'to our sensory perception as it is dispersed over too large a field' such as an entire city.[148] When 'aesthetic fairness and ethical fairness are both present to perception…. the analogy is inert'.[149] When one of these terms 'is missing, the term that is present becomes active, insistent, calling out for, dire cting our attention towards what is absent'.[150] Therefore, when beauty is present and justice is not, beauty acts as a lever in the direction of justice. This linking of beauty to justice is not

[143] Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just,* 100.
[144] Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just,* 95.
[145] Scarry, *On Beauty and Bei ng Just,* 111.
[146] Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just,* 112.
[147] Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just,* 113.
[148] Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just,* 101.
[149] Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just,* 109.
[150] Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just,* 109.

without precedent. For Plato, beauty was inseparable from goodness[151] and, as noted earlier, for Kant 'the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good'.[152] Nonetheless I remain somewhat sceptical of the capacity of beauty to act in this fashion. There is a connection with the aims of my art in that I anticipate that it will elicit critical reflection and that this may engender concern for the natural environment. However my visual work relies on symbolic means in addition to the representations of plants in a beautiful form to indicate loss. By contrast, Scarry claims that beauty alone acts as a lever in the direction of justice.

Beauty and Connections/Extinction and the Loss of Connections .

An insightful view of the experience of beauty is expressed by Armstrong: 'The kinds of connections we find in beautiful objects have a deep human significance. They correspond to the profound needs we have - to discover meaningful connections and to unite ourselves with others'.[153] There is a marked contrast, however, between Armstrong's assessment of the connections an experience of beauty brings and the reality of extinction. Extinction eradicates the possibility of connections and destroys the possibility of relationships between living things; whereas beauty arouses meaningful connections. By representing extinct plants in a beautiful form, I am attempting, in the first instance to arouse connections between the viewer and the plants. However, in the second instance, the symbolic associations of commemoration and loss indicate that the possibility of connections has been extinguished. The beautiful responses that I aim to elicit in my art are subversive because I am not seeking to provide pleasure but instead to generate a sense of anguish due to the loss of these plants.

Concluding remarks

The ideas of the theorists I have presented in this chapter have enabled me to articulate the reasons why I have sought to create art which will elicit a beautiful response. This process of synthesis and evaluation has assisted me to

[151] Halliwell, "Plato (c.427-327 BC)", in *A Companion to Aesthetics,* ed. Cooper, 328.
[152] Kant as quoted in White, "Morality and Art", in *A Companion to Aesthetics,* ed. Cooper, 293.
[153] Armstrong, *The Secret Power of Beauty*, 48.

clarify and understand what had previously been an intuitive approach. My encounter with the ideas of others has enabled me to place my work in a theoretical context and to gain some understanding of how the viewers of my work may be affected by an experience of beauty. Nevertheless, beauty remains a beguiling subject which continues to provoke contemplation. In the next chapter, I investigate the work of contemporary artists concerned with beauty, nature, and extinction before describing additional aspects of my art.